DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 227 CS 200 713

AUTHOR Love, Glen A.
TITLE The Current State of Rhetoric, Or Up the Down Staircase.
PUB DATE Nov 72
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (62nd, Minneapolis, Nov. 23-25, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); Conference Reports; Educational Theories; Elementary Education; *English Instruction; *Rhetoric; Secondary Education; *Structural Analysis; Teaching Techniques; *Writing; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Dartmouth Seminar

ABSTRACT

Modern rhetoricians have begun to redefine basic structural units by observing and analyzing the process of formation, for example, sentences and paragraphs. Writing is beginning to be understood as a series of commitments and responses. Student exercises that objectify the vital concepts of form and organization in writing utilize rearrangement of sentences and sentence fragments, followed by discussions of the inherent strengths and weaknesses in each arrangement. Stylistic differences can be conveyed to students through the use of prose passages dealing with the same topic, but differing mainly in voice and audience. Upon understanding the effects of style, students can then revise their own writing stylistically. (LL)

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THE CURRENT STATE OF RHETORIC, OR

UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

Glen A. Love (Associate Professor of English and former Director of Composition, U. of Oregon. Chief rhetoric author, The Oregon Curriculum.)

The main problem with the teaching of writing in the secondary schools is that there is precious little of it, and what there is is often irrelevant to the central problems of rhetoric. My temerity in making such a claim comes not primarily from reading the Squire and Applebee study, which found that even in the best high school English programs in the country less than 16 per cent of class time was being spent on composition, and that time went mostly to peripheral matters.[1] Nor have I based this audacious judgment just on the years I have spent recently helping to plan and write a new curriculum in rhetoric for the public schools, and then poking about in these same schools to find how little of it was being tried. No, my rash assurance that little writing gets taught in the schools--and that little, often badly--is based upon a more elemental experience: my own beginning years as an English teacher in an urban junior high school in the mid-1950's. Ignorant of any theory of rhetoric suitable for the classroom, confused as to long-range, let alone short-range, goals for my students' writing, overwhelmed by the enormity of teaching an activity that seemed to have no beginning and no end, that was so complicated that even though I could somehow manage it fairly well myself I could not even begin to systematize for my students, I was a classic expression of the problem I now cite.

Intimidated by the difficulty of attacking the whole task of writing, I found myself veering off to teach other things simply because I could teach

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[1] James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, High School English Instruction Today (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1968), p. 121.

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them. I knew what I was doing with literature or grammar, whereas I never did when I started in on composition. I began collecting gimmicks, little sure-fire classroom activities which would safely get me through a period, or a week. Once my bag of tricks was big enough to get me through an entire year, I would have it made, I thought. I even gathered up some tricks about composition. Here's a good exercise. Here's another. Although I sensed that I was only nibbling at the edges of that enormous matter of composition, it was enough that I could say to myself, however lamely, that after all, I had tried. So it goes.

I have been fairly sure, ever since, that my own experiences, writ large, account for the general absence of a strong composition program in the public schools.

But it is also worth conjecture that the causes for the widespread anemia of rhetoric in the schools may go deeper than a failure of knowledge or of nerve on the part of the teacher. It may go deeper than the poor preparation, the poor textbooks, the overloaded classes and schedules which are indicted by implication in my unflattering self-analysis. It may be that rhetoric, or the art of effective communication, somehow grates against our idealized apprehension of ourselves as Americans: clear-eyed Jeffersonian yeomen, strong, silent types, men of deeds, not words. In the popular mind the very word "rhetoric" seems to have meaning only in association with pejoratives like "false," or "empty," or "inflated." It is not the effective communicator but the taciturn cowboy, the secret agent with his lip buttoned, the eternally inarticulate young man of the films or television who show us, with an anti-rhetorical vengeance, how we Americans want to see ourselves. What is honored in a country, says the sage, will be cultivated there. Must not the reverse also be true? Need we look further for the root of our ills?

But if the tendency is indeed strong within us, as Americans, to denigrate rhetoric, as American teachers we must have the responsibility of pointing out to our students that we are as a nation in no small way the creation of our rhetoric. To repudiate it is to repudiate the Declaration of Independence, Thoreau's Walden and "Civil Disobedience," the Gettysburg Address, the Kennedy inaugural speech, Martin Luther King's "Letter From the Birmingham Jail," and all of the other great compositions of our heritage which have acknowledged an audience and sought to influence it in one way or another.

H. L. Mencken saw the problem of composition as simply going beyond the limits of what is teachable, not only to boobus Americanus but to the whole suffering mob of humanity. As he once wryly claimed,

> Trying to teach (writing) to persons who cannot think, especially when the business is attempted by persons who also cannot think, is a great waste of time, and an immoral imposition upon the taxpayers of the nation. It would be far more logical to devote all the energy to teaching, not writing, but logic--and probably just as useless. For I doubt that the art of thinking can be taught at all--at any rate, by school-teachers. It is not acquired, but congenital. Some persons are born with it. Their ideas flow in straight channels; they are capable of lucid reasoning; when they say anything it is instantly understandable; when they write anything it is clear and persuasive. They constitute, I should say, about one-eighth of one per cent of the human race. The rest of God's children are just as incapable of logical thought as they are incapable of jumping over the moon. Trying to teach them is as vain an enterprise as trying to teach a streptococcus the principles of Americanism. The only thing to do with them is to make Ph.D.'s of them, and set them to writing handbooks on style.[2]

As teachers in a democracy, and more particularly as teachers of writing in a democracy, it seems to me that we have no choice but to reject this sprightly cynicism in the same cheerful fashion in which it is offered. Whether thinking can be taught or not may be debatable, but not if we intend to go on teaching writing. If thinking indeed lies beyond the limits of the teachable then we

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[2]From "Literature and the Schoolma'm," Prejudices: Fifth Series (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1926).

may as well shut up shop as teachers of rhetoric and turn back to Huckleberry Finn or the mysteries of the trasformational tree. If we want to skate, it has to be on thin ice or not at all. And not at all would accomplish nothing but to leave ourselves and our students ignorant of a vital aspect of our humanity, and unprepared for a world in which bad rhetoric as well as good are in contention for mortal stakes.

We have, I believe, come some ways, theoretically, from the point in the mid-fifties when the pathetic young man of our earlier scenario stood before his class. We have had, since that time, a resurgence of interest in the theory of rhetoric, and as a result of this, and the work done in some of the Project English programs, and some promising new textbooks, there is less reason for despair now than there was then. Both in philosophy and application, rhetoric has made significant advances which ought to provide the basis for better writing programs in the schools today than in the past. In what follows I would like to summarize what seem to me to be the central ideas which characterize these recent advances.

Before doing so let me reassert some of the common assumptions about a rhetoric-centered curriculum in composition. First of all, the aim of a curriculum in rhetoric is to help students communicate effectively. Rhetoric presupposes that effective discourse will take some thinking about in the composing stage; that is, the composing act must be deliberative because the aim of all meaningful speaking and writing is to achieve some purpose with some audience. And this is true whether the audience is oneself, as in a private diary or journal, one's best friend, in a note or letter, one's family, or classmates, or teacher, a special-interest group, one's community, or any one of a thousand widening audiences.

With this aim--effective communication--rhetoric must reject the rule-centered doctrine of "correctness." Instead, it approaches the teaching of usage, spelling, and punctuation as means by which someone, composing for his own purposes, may increase the effectiveness of his message with his intended audience. Further, rhetoric considers matters of usage, spelling, and punctuation as secondary to the main concerns of composing, which, in the Oregon curriculum, we have termed substance, structure, and style. Substance encompasses the shapeless ideas, the lump of experience, with which the writer is engaged as he composes. Structure is the means by which he gives form and coherence to this substance. Style is concerned with the unique and special qualities of language which will identify and distinguish the finished composition as the work of an individual writer communicating his apprehension of experience to a specific audience. What do recent advances in the theory and practice of rhetoric have to offer to the teacher of composition today?

I. Substance

The most difficult and basic of all problems related to the act of composing has always been to aid the student in generating ideas about his subject. Traditionally, however, the English teacher, who can give a student plenty of help, or hell, once he has gotten something down on paper, has been of very little assistance where assistance is most needed: in aiding the student to produce ideas in the first place. The older textbooks, and unfortunately some of the newer, treat the process of composing as a kind of no-nonsense, sixty-words-to-the-minute affair wherein the student briskly selects his topic, writes a rough outline, a rough draft, revises it, and turns out a final copy. All very businesslike, and all, of course, pretty much unrelated to the way good writing gets written, as anyone knows who has ever gone through the anguish of rewriting his opening sentence fifteen times, or, like Oscar Wilde, has spent the morning putting in a comma, and the afternoon taking it out.

The thoughtful teacher thus will probably welcome the shift of attention away from this test-tube concept of writing and toward what has come to be called the stage of pre-writing. This change of emphasis from the finished product to the stages of discovery reveals itself in the classroom in the increasing attention to self-examination through the use of the journal, and through a number of exercises which attempt to duplicate the kind of mental activities which are necessary to produce writing in the first place, exercises calling for sharpened external observation, for applying a series of probing questions to one's subject, as Richard Larson has demonstrated, for drawing meanings and conclusions from an array of objective data, for creating metaphorical and analogical comparisons, for free-associating, for collective "brainstorming" of an idea, and the like. As one of the earliest advocates of pre-writing, James McCrimmon, has said, "Invention can be taught, if we teach it."

Much of this current emphasis upon the processes of discovery in writing may be seen to parallel the philosophical assumptions of what has been spoken of in recent years as an emerging "new rhetoric." Common to these assumptions, as described by Richard Ohmann, is the belief that the rhetorical act is more properly regarded not as the writer's justification to his audience of a truth that he has already discovered, but as writer and audience sharing in the process of discovery. Thus, the activities of self-discovery and meaning-making associated with pre-writing are likely to be more valid and productive than those activities associated with traditional rhetoric's pre-calculated strategies and effects.

II. Structure

Questions of form, organization, development--here gathered under the heading of structure--are closely tied to those of substance. Assuming that the techniques of pre-writing and invention have given the student something

to say, what promising practices now exist to help him to shape and direct his emerging ideas? How can the teacher in the classroom communicate more clearly than in the past the means by which the sentences in good writing go together to form coherent units of prose? In this area, important discoveries with both theoretical and practical implications have come to the surface in recent years. Modern rhetoricians have begun to ask the most basic questions about how sentences accrue. They have begun to examine writing as a series of what Robert Gorrell has called commitments and responses, a manifestation of Kenneth Burke's description of form as the arousing, then fulfilling, of an expectation. Armed with the techniques gained from fifty years of the new criticism in literature, new rhetoricians have found that expository prose yields surprising insights to close reading and structural analysis. They have begun to push sentence grammar beyond the sentence as a kind of paradigm for discovering the form of longer stretches of prose. They have recently redefined basic structural units like the paragraph as a result of having closely observed and analyzed the ways in which writers actually from paragraphs, rather than by perpetuating traditional textbook lore about how paragraphs ought to be formed. Out of this renewed interest in studying the way that writing takes shape should come a wealth of useful material for the teacher and student. Let me give some examples which I have used recently:

1. Give the class the title and first sentence of a model essay. Ask the students, then, to predict what the second sentence will be. Compare predictions with the author's actual second sentence. Move through three or four more sentences in the same way. What patterns of commitment and response begin to emerge? What words or phrases within the sentences act as hooks to link them to preceding sentences, or as arrows to point to sentences to come?

2. Experiment with rearranging the parts of one of these early sentences in as many different (and coherent) ways as possible. Discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. In the same manner, change the order of the opening three or four sentences. What happens, as a result, to the pattern of commitment and response?

3. Choose one of these sentences, or any sentence with an unusual structure, and ask the students to imitate its form, i.e., to plug their own words and ideas in, but to keep the same structure and punctuation as the original sentence. Or, ask students to change left-branching sentences to right-branching, or self-imbedding, and vice-versa. As an outgrowth of these exercises, discuss the relationship between the form of a sentence and its function.

4. Change the analytic pattern of the above exercises to a generative or creative one: ask a student to name a subject, and encourage the class to "brainstorm" it for a few minutes, with the teacher noting the random ideas on the board. Select a purpose for which the subject is to be written and an audience to whom the resulting essay is to be directed. Then, work out, together, an effective opening sentence. Ask for suggestions for this sentence and write them on the board. Discuss the various strengths and weaknesses of each. Does one seem to pull the subject off in the wrong direction? Does another give away too much at the start? Is there not enough to attract the reader in some of them? Which sentence makes the clearest and most effective commitment to what is to come? Respond to this commitment by writing the second sentence. As a result of this and preceding exercises discuss why the opening sentence is often a difficult one for a writer to get down on paper.

Such exercises not only objectify the vital concepts of form and organization in writing, but they bring up to a conscious level the notion of writing as discovery, rather than an antiseptic and routine activity. By dramatizing the sorts of mental activity that we, as writers, all go through in getting even that first sentence down, we provide a way for the student to recognize and overcome the intimidation by the blank page which every student has experienced. Further, we provide practice in the same sorts of decision-making that the student will need in creating his own effective writing structures.

Moving from individual sentences and groups of sentences to the paragraph, the basic structural unit of longer stretches of prose, one can use the same sorts of activities to foster an inductive understanding of the paragraph which will be far more accurate and helpful to students in their own writing than most textbook definitions. For example,

1. Ask the class to provide a topic sentence for a paragraph from which it has been eliminated. Discuss how and why it is possible to do this.
2. Ask students to write a paragraph containing a sentence about the California redwoods and another sentence about the Statue of Liberty (or any two or more disparate items), with neither of these sentences to be the topic sentence. Discuss what the exercise reveals about the structure and purpose of the topic sentence.
3. Scramble the sentences in a paragraph and ask the class to unscramble them. Why was it possible, or impossible, to unscramble them?
4. Teacher and students bring in paragraphs of all different sizes and structures. Defend them as paragraphs.
5. As a result of all of these activities, define "paragraph."

And from the structure of the paragraph, one may naturally proceed to the structure of the whole essay or work with similar kinds of exercises.

Activities which sharpen awareness of the linear flow of prose from sentence to sentence and from sentence to paragraph, and from paragraph to paragraph, such as have been described above, may be profitably supplemented by such techniques as those developed by Francis Christensen for increasing specificity or density within the sentence and paragraph units of the structural flow.

III. Style

The last decade has seen a productive dialogue between the rhetorician, the linguist, and the literary critic on the subject of style. From the standpoint of linguistics, one thinks of the series of essays by Richard Ohmann seeking to link a workable theory of style to the underlying structural features of language as described in Chomsky's theory of phrase structure-transformational grammar. Our awareness of style has likewise been enhanced by the studies of literary critics like David Lodge, Josephine Miles, Ian Watt, and Richard Bridgman, who have applied to prose the kind of close explication formerly reserved to the study of poetry. The work of these and many other literary critics has demonstrated that the short story and the novel, as well as the lyric or sonnet, may yield important insights to detailed examination, and such methods have been extended to non-fiction prose, particularly to the personal essay in the hands of a master like Thoreau or Mencken or Orwell. Growing out of this dialogue on style has come a common awareness of style as the pattern of <u>choices</u> which a writer habitually makes from the alternatives available to him. This conception of style as choice has become a useful one for the classroom teacher, sufficient to justify, in his or her training, the necessity for at least a rudimentary understanding of some of the simpler techniques for describing and analyzing style, such as those set forth in Edward P. J. Corbett's demonstration analysis of Swift's "Modest Proposal."

Another useful classroom idea which has grown out of stylistic study in recent years has been that of the speaking voice, the conception of a narrator or speaker who stands between the actual author and the reader, articulating the words on the printed page. Our awareness of the presence of the speaking voice and its interrelationships with its other half, the listener, reader, audience, has come largely from the work of Walker Gibson and Wayne Booth. One of Gibson's early essays, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in 1950, had an important influence upon Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction, in 1961, a book which has in turn, by virtue of its wide impact, made the terms voice and audience familiar to many teachers of English on all levels.

Applied in the classroom, the concepts of voice and audience may be easily presented to students through the use of "duplicate" passages, prose excerpts which are centered upon the same (roughly) lump of experience, and therefore whose differences may be considered as primarily stylistic, i.e., the produce of different voices speaking to different audiences. A useful Gibson-inspired exercise, for example, is to hand out a dittoed sheet to the class on which are the opening lines from several student-authored autobiographies mixed in with similar first-person autobiographical selections on birth and early life from such works as Dickens' David Copperfield, Salinger's The Catcher in The Rye, Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March, and Malcolm X's Autobiography. All of the selections should be anonymous. In the class discussion which follows, students are quick to sense the different speaking voices in the various selections, and, with a little encouragement, are soon making important and insightful judgments about the speakers from the stylistic clues which are present. From this discussion students can turn to the writing or revising of their own autobiographical compositions with a new awareness of the

potentiality of their own speaking voices. By their choice of words, phrases, figures of speech, sentence patterns, etc., they have the power to create on their pages a unique and individual personality for their reader, and to provoke from that reader a unique response.

Through such work, the hazy and shapless term "style" can be quickly brought into sharp relief, and the creative and liberating opportunities of the rhetorical act can become a part of the awareness of many students.

These, then, are some of the new ideas from the discipline of rhetoric which have important implications for the composition programs in the schools. If I were not under the sway of rhetoric, I might stop now with a pious hope that all of these new ideas would somehow bring light to our benighted profession. But I am forced by my rhetorical training to ask myself, what about the audience of English teachers and curriculum developers to whom many of these ideas have been addressed over the recent years? Is anybody listening? My own observation has led me to believe that not many are listening. Ironically, at a time when there are genuinely new and promising developments in rhetoric, the interests of its audience seem to have drifted elsewhere. Today, rhetoricians have brought a large and useful package of materials into the schoolhouse, only to find that most of the teachers are out on the playground, flying their freedom-and-creativity kites in the high wind that blows from Britain by way of Dartmouth. That the wind is a fair one for the British, crawling out from under centuries of a repressive and rigidly stratified social system, is, I believe, undeniable. When the breeze reaches to this side of the Atlantic, to a country whose cultural and educational development is not at all analogous to that of Britain and whose debates over teaching the whole child have already been thrashed out years ago--when this breeze blows across America, I wonder if it isn't comprised largely of hot air. What is most discouraging about this latest swing of the educational

pendulum is its evidence of the extent to which we as English teachers, as presumably intelligent people who ought to know better, tend to go charging off at full bay after every scent that crosses the trail. Rushing here and there, pursuing one fashionable trend after another--general semantics, communication theory, linguistics, films, the feelies--our history as a profession is littered with the remains of deflated panaceas. What is worse, we have probably not given any one of them the full attention which might have allowed us to explore its potential fully.

Indeed, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, and we do our students and our profession an injustice not to try to learn whatever we can, in both theory and technique, about creativity and personal expression from our colleagues in Britain. I have argued elsewhere that almost any approach to writing can achieve worthwhile results in any given composition class, provided the teacher is indeed concentrating upon writing, is enthusiastic, and knows what goals are being pursued.[3] Where the composition class is a one-shot, unrepeatable experience, as on the college level, it makes little sense, I believe, to maintain otherwise. But in the context of the student in the school English program which spans a number of years, an endless succession of "free" writing experiences--when there are writing experiences at all--from one teacher after another in one class after another turns out not to be free at all but instead expensive. Expensive in its waste of the wider opportunities which are available to the student only when freedom is balanced by discipline, when the act of writing is seen in its wholeness, when self-expression is tempered by an awareness

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[3] "World Views and the Teaching of Composition," CCC, XXII (February, 1971), pp. 30-34.

of other selves with whom we must somehow try to communicate effectively if we are to have a world in which selfhood is still possible. Good writing, in short, not only deserves but demands good readers, and when we put the two together, we are in the realm of rhetoric.

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